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Millionaire Brush Manufacturer Buried at St. Paul's

A tall granite obelisk in the St. Paul's cemetery commemorates the grave of Alfred H. Duncombe, who earned a fortune as a brush manufacturer in New York City in the early 19th century before purchasing a large estate about a mile from the church. But the stately symbol of endurance belies a struggle over his legacy that reveals a pulp fiction storyline.

Born in Connecticut in 1805, Alfred was only three when his British-born father Nathaniel Duncombe died and his mother Nancy moved the family to New York City, where other relatives lived. At a young age, Duncombe was apprenticed to Daniel Berrian, the city's leading brush maker, creating the circumstances for Alfred's eventual entrepreneurial success. Apprenticeships, more than formal schooling, remained a common professional and vocational training system.

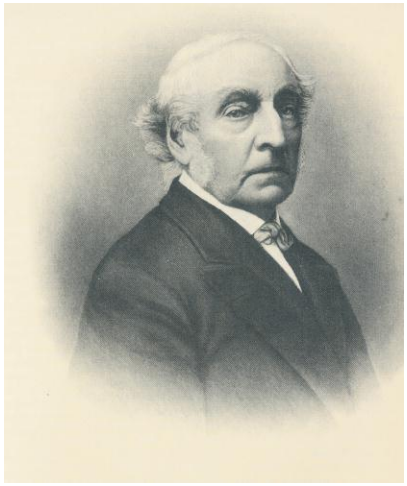
Upon reaching adulthood in the mid 1820s, Alfred, with assistance from his mentor, established his own brush production on Pearl Street. In a pre-industrial age, these were spacious facilities accommodating a labor intensive business. Sitting at tables, scores of men hand assembled the brushes. Holes were drilled into wooden blocks and bristles were individually installed, fastened with molten glue. Bristles could be animal hair, usually horse, but sometimes pig, goat or squirrel; vegetable fibers might also be used. Consumer product lines ranged from hairbrushes and tooth brushes to horse brushes and chimney sweepers. Soft wire brushes cleaned printing presses and textile equipment. Barbers and house cleaning firms also purchased brushes.

In varying degrees, Duncombe's factory probably delivered all of these forms of brushes, since his establishment was very productive and profitable, serving domestic customers at a time of tremendous population and economic growth in New York and across the country. In 1850, he owned a 50-acre estate valued at $30,000, or about $815,000 in today's money, and by the late 19th century the former apprentice was a millionaire. Duncombe married Helen Stockton in 1829, and they remained together until her death in 1877. Two sons died very young, but a daughter Adeline, an eventual participant in the

tussle over her father's vast estate, survived into adulthood, marrying twice and bearing three children.

The brush manufacturer's burial in the St. Paul's cemetery is peripherally related to his business success: the wealth generated by his venture facilitated the purchase in 1846 of a large estate in the rural community. About 20 miles north of the Manhattan business district, the millionaire created a home reflecting his status as a Victorian era country squire. An elegant mansion was constructed amid wooden lands, reached by crossing stone bridges that arched over brooks that coursed through the property. His relocation also reflected the influence of transportation on the expansion of metropolitan New York. The extension of the Harlem line railroad into the St. Paul's vicinity by the mid 1840s accommodated local residence of people who needed to periodically travel to New York City to maintain commercial or social responsibilities. .

His first documented association with St. Paul's appears in connection with the 1846 burial of his mother in the churchyard, concurrent with his purchase of acres of land about a mile from the 18th century stone edifice. A wealthy, respectable gentleman, Duncombe naturally joined the local church upon moving to the area. This pledge commenced a half century relationship with St. Paul's, and his name is frequently inked into the church records, sponsoring the adult baptism of his 17-year-old daughter Adeline and later the Episcopal initiation of three grandchildren. The small, financially struggling country parish appreciated the generous donations and business talents of a manufacturing giant through whose "financial skill the church has twice been relived from the burdens of embarrassing debt," the rector William Coffey wrote with gratitude in the 1880s. A warden, or leader, of the parish for 40 years, Duncombe eventually served as Chief Warden, the highest ranking lay member of the congregation.



Alfred H. Duncombe, 1880s.

A successful, semi-retired town resident, whose commercial acumen was well known, Duncombe was drawn into positions of public responsibility. These were appointive, voluntary offices overseeing community assets through such roles as Commissioner of Highways, Trustee of Town Property, and President of the Board of Public Lands.

While his biography suggests a public spirited, triumphant19th century businessmen who retired early, the more intriguing chapter of his life originated with the death of his wife Helen in 1877, who was buried at St. Paul's. Within a year, Duncombe, in his mid 70s, re-married, choosing as a bride a woman named Naomi Lamoreaux who had recently moved to Westchester County from the Midwest. She was forty years younger than Alfred and had divorced her first husband.

Rev. Coffey, certainly sympathetic to the church's Chief Warden, reported in the mid 1880s that Duncombe, living with his young wife, "passes the evening of his days in quiet and retirement." In an alternative view, Adeline, Duncombe's daughter from the first marriage, claimed that Naomi, well aware of Alfred's wealth, employed charm and cunning to facilitate the marriage. This allegedly shrewd maneuver would have some confirmation through Naomi's arrangement, with Alfred's apparent approval, of the eviction of Adeline and her family from a Mt. Vernon residence owned by her father. In addition, Adeline was omitted from the line of inheritance of her father's estate. Naturally, the disparaging concept, which circulated at the time, of a 'fortune hunter' emerges, although elderly, rich widowers marrying younger women was not unheard of in Victorian America, or later.

At any rate, Naomi and Alfred lived in matrimony for 15 years through 1893, when Alfred died in his late 80s, followed by interment at St. Paul's. He left his entire estate valued at $2 million to Naomi, who was nearly 50. Controversies and battles over money, property and reputation that dragged on for two decades, prosecuted in the courts and heavily recounted in newspapers, should be understood in that context. We are talking about an inheritance -- liquid assets, real estate holdings and other sources -- worth more than $50 million in today's value.


THE NEW YORK HERALD.

NEW YORK, SATURDAY, JUNE 22, 1907.—EIGHTEEN PAGES.—BY THE NEW YORK HERALD COMPANY.

DEAD BODY
MISSING CHILD

Claimant to Duncombe Estate Sues Banker for $200,000

Clarence S. McClellan, Who Drew Up Deeds to Naomi Duncombe, a Defendant.

REOPEN FIGHT FOR AGED MAN'S WEALTH

Effort to Establish Partly Burned Will Bearing Name of Mount Vernon Capitalist.

LONG BATTLE FOR ESTATE

New Suit Grows Out of Transfers of Property to Daughter of His Second Wife.

PATRICK J. RING

C. J. McCLELLAND

Example of press coverage of the Duncombe saga.

Readers in Mt. Vernon and New York City were enthralled with the tribulations of the very wealthy, eccentric widow, who was the object of curiosity, jealousy and efforts to obtain a share of the fortune. An immediate question was whether Naomi was entitled to the entire estate, since Duncombe's daughter and grandchildren survived the brush manufacturer. Adeline challenged the validity of the transfer of the whole estate to Naomi. While the courts upheld the conveyance, Naomi agreed to private settlements, based partly on written pledges from Alfred to his daughter, calling for payments of $30,000 ($750,000 today) to Adeline, who died in 1898, followed by burial at St. Paul's near her parents. Also defeated in the courts were civil actions years later by Adeline's children, who were Alfred's grandchildren, claiming that Naomi had destroyed another testament that transferred a portion of the estate to Adeline.

On the level of popular entertainment, what reporter could resist a shootout at the stone mansion between Duncombe family factions or a raid on an illegal gambling operation where Naomi wagered on horse racing. Especially absorbing was the 60-year-old Naomi's elopement in 1904 with Patrick Ring, who had for several years provided oversight and security on the large estate. Previously a professional wrestler, Ring also supervised the building of the sparkling Mt. Vernon Opera House, erected with funding

drawn from Naomi's inherited fortune. Months before the wedding Naomi horsewhipped Ring in public while he was conversing with another woman. Within two months of the nuptials, Naomi disavowed the union, separating from the former circus strong man. The heiress claimed Ring had exercised his control over her safety and property to cunningly maneuver her into marriage to secure portions of her estate.

In a case that stretched for years, a Sunday school teacher (the woman associated with the horsewhipping) successfully sued Naomi for thousands of dollars in a slander suit, claiming Mrs. Duncombe Ring made allegations about relations between her and the estranged husband. Despite police warnings, Naomi, who was widely recognized as a local celebrity, ostentatiously displayed her wealth, carrying large amounts of money and wearing expensive jewels on daily excursions on local streetcars. This pattern led to attempted robberies and some bold rescues, one by a young Mt. Vernon girl who helped thwart an attempted attack and was rewarded for her valor.

Naomi's lifestyle after her inheritance was not reflective of a faithful congregant of a staid Episcopal church, and there's little connection with St. Paul's after the mid 1890s. Accusations by family members that she squandered Alfred's fortune have some credibility. She died in 1911 with a reported net worth of $1 million, which meant in 18 years she disposed of a million dollars, or roughly $25 million in today's equivalent. About $50,000 (roughly $1.2 million today) developed the 2,000-seat Mt. Vernon Opera House, a genuine contribution to the cultural and civic life of a small city. But the $1 million bequeathment, granted principally to a granddaughter through her first marriage, was sufficiently hefty to invite a new round of conflicts over the distribution of her estate.